

critical dance studies

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**DANCE  
[AND]  
THEORY**

**[transcript]**

## Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art

by Jacques Rancière. Translated by Zakir Paul. 2013. London: Verso. 304 pp., index. \$29.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper, e-book available.

## Dance [and] Theory

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By many recent accounts, dance and theory are natural bedfellows—an art form and a form of critique that are inherently unstable, difficult to discuss. Both are notoriously impervious to systematic accounts because they are in states of physical and conceptual motion, perpetually underdetermined.

Theory—of the Frankfurt or Yale School varieties, of the kind that continues to multiply in the wake of cultural studies—has long been applied to dance as a critical tool. Two new books are part of a scholarly trend that has been reversing that dynamic, applying dance to theory in an attempt to offer newly rich understandings of both. Scholars interested in how dance aesthetics serve a critical function should welcome their arrival. Jacques Rancière's *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* shows a prominent philosopher employing dance and movement as central concepts in his aesthetic theory (indeed, an image of Loie Fuller graces the cover of this and other translated editions). Meanwhile, *Dance [and] Theory*, an anthology edited by Gabriele Brandstetter and Gabriele Klein, offers a range of views on how the critical prerogatives of theory intertwine with the practice of dancing. While published just prior to *Aisthesis*, many of the critics in this collection draw upon Rancière's earlier work and treat him as a crucial interlocutor. *Dance [and] Theory* may thus be seen as, in part, a response to Rancière—one that points toward a more capacious, messy, and fruitful relationship between theory and dance.

Since *Aisthesis* ranges across a variety of disciplines and media, Joseph Tanke (2013), in his review for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, noted that “it will be interesting to see how specialists from different fields respond.” Such concerns are well founded from the perspective of dance studies, since Rancière makes some questionable claims about dance history, and offers a surprisingly body-averse account of what dance is. And yet because scholarly discussion of dance has often been limited to dance specialists, seeing a prominent thinker treat dance as an indispensable site of inquiry is welcome, and even leads to some of the book's richest passages.

Rancière's ongoing discussion of periodization in art is both innovative and arguable, furthered here by a resolute push to bring “modernism” as a critical term toward its day of reckoning. In *The Politics of Aesthetics* and in various work since, he has characterized three “regimes” in the history of Western art, ways of understanding art that don't quite map to sequential periods and yet are helpfully understood through them (Rancière 2004). The ethical regime, inaugurated by Plato and predominant in antiquity, understands art (more properly, image) with regard to its influence upon the ethos of an individual or community. The representative regime, inaugurated by Aristotle and predominant in the what he terms the “classical” fine arts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, conceives of art as *mimesis*, a situation in which art is seen as representing life due to a normative relationship between formal properties and what they express.

*Aisthesis* furthers Rancière's theorization of a third regime, the aesthetic—one that he sees arising diffusely during the late eighteenth century, “when Art began to be named as such” (xiii). And yet that very enshrinement of art as a special category continually destabilizes distinctions between art and daily life: “Art exists as a separate world since anything whatsoever can belong to it” (x). Where other approaches to periodization often ground themselves in relation to historical events of wide-ranging consequence (e.g., modernism and global war), Rancière's account relies on less tidy criteria, for example the aesthetic regime's tendency toward a politics that breaks with hierarchy, that repudiates or suspends action. What is refreshing here is the way he extends claims about modernism's proclivity for disruption and resistance to earlier artistic movements, and yet at times his periodizing impulses seem conflicted. He doesn't want to offer too fixed a history of aesthetic thought, but he does want to offer a “counter-history of ‘artistic modernity’” (xiii)—Rancière wants to not have his cake, and not eat it too.

More questionable is the frequency with which he makes the aesthetic regime's emancipatory politics a rejection of the capacity to act, suggesting that the aesthetic becomes political precisely because of the way it interrupts the normative or arrests attention, not unlike the “radical inaction” of a general strike (see for example xv–xvi). This is a compelling, rich, and useful view of art's politics, especially in the way that it suggests the politically active consequences of seemingly disjunctive aesthetics. And yet it does not account for the many ways in which art fully enmeshed in such aesthetics has presumed to do the very opposite, for example in some quarters of social justice art. (Modernism's aesthetic utopias, after all, were coextensive with many a utopian political movement of both naively wishful and darkly regimenting bents.)

With a nod to Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, Rancière divides the book into fourteen “scenes” (Auerbach 1953). In each scene, he selects an author from the last two centuries who described an important work of art and close-reads an instance of his writing, helping us to see anew the *way* that he saw, to apprehend his apprehension as “displacements in the perception of what art signifies” (xiii). In the process, he often blurs his own critical voice with theirs—for example, in the main chapter on dance his views and those of his subject, Stéphane Mallarmé, are frequently indistinct. At times this contributes to the impression that he imposes his own way of seeing on his subject. More often it means that he carries the aesthetic horizons of his subject forward to his own reader.

In exploring the aesthetic regime's material conditions and modes of perception, the way in which it alters the “sensible fabric of experience” (x), Rancière frequently relies on examples from dance history. It is striking just how much his conception of art's disruptive capacity rests on an understanding that is more kinetic than visual. He notes that the “*movement* [emphasis mine] belonging to the aesthetic regime . . . tends to erase the specificities of the arts and to blur the boundaries that separate them from each other and from ordinary experience” (xii). If the aesthetic regime engenders movement across disciplines and categories, it is no wonder that the movements of dance serve as a frequent object of study. One of Rancière's chief interests is that way in which the “renovators of dance and theater freed bodily movements from the shackles of plot” (xv). In his account, dance became an autonomous art once it emancipated the body from an obligation to tell stories—that is, from the representative regime (9). Across the book, Rancière touches on a number of dance-makers who contribute to this break, especially Charlie Chaplin, François Delsarte, Isadora Duncan, Jean-Georges Noverre, and above all Loie Fuller.

His lumping of Jean-Georges Noverre's *ballet d'action* and Isadora Duncan's free movement under the same regime is a questionable move, and yet Rancière gets traction out of such comparisons, in part by relying on the way that both choreographers undo some form of representative logic. In his view, even *while* Noverre pursues an expressive, narrative ballet, his desire that dance should take a lead from painting *also* undercuts its expressivity, marking a shift away from “the organic model of the whole, with its proportions and its symmetries” (7). Noverre's dance is one of several contemporaneous developments that “undo the supposed conjunction of formal beauty and living expression” (8). Under Duncan, meanwhile, the “links that oblige bodily positions to signify fixed

emotions are undone” (10). This line of thinking might be questioned in a number of ways. One example: if Noverre, despite himself, marks the stirring of an anti-expressive form that ripened under Duncan, why not trace this stirring yet further back—say to John Weaver and his vacillations over what it meant to be grotesque and expressive? Weaver could well be seen in the terms Rancière uses for Chaplin, as a dance-maker who achieves a mechanical precision of movement precisely because he is virtuosic and vulgar in the same instant (202).

Rancière’s most sustained treatment of dance comes in a subtle “scene” devoted to Mallarmé’s writings on Fuller, in a chapter he titles “The Dance of Light.” His treatment of Fuller/Mallarmé is part of a recent shift in attention from Duncan to Fuller, and it is telling that Fuller seems to have become a critical favorite for scholars outside of dance studies. This may be in part because her use of extensive scenic elements allows non-dance scholars, Rancière included, to assess her art while talking about something *other* than dance (more generously put, to talk about dance without recourse to a rarefied critical vocabulary with which they may not be familiar).

In many ways, this question of where the dance resides in Fuller is central to Rancière’s reading. He sees her serpentine dance, as *seen* by Mallarmé, as a “perpetual variation” that “scoffs at proportion” (95). He terms her costume a sinuous “veil” with Fuller as its “dead center”—an effect that “displays the potential of the body by hiding it” (96). Like music, which “uses a material instrument to produce an immaterial sensible milieu,” her body is “unlocatable” while organizing the veil’s substitution of a “play of aspects” for plot (97–100). At times, Rancière makes the dancing body sound like a way station for the transmutation of music to fabric. At other times he makes special claims for dance’s ability to collapse art into life. In his account, Fuller’s dance captures the very power of abstraction; indeed it abstracts the body from itself by depicting a multiplicity of motions, not things: flights instead of birds, bloomings instead of flowers (100). Her prioritization of actions over objects is in keeping with the aesthetic regime’s larger destabilizing impulses, especially its habit of replacing “plot” with “movement” (xi). Fuller’s dance becomes a sort of figure for figuration itself (99, 101)—a form of elemental potential that Mallarmé sought to repatriate into the writing of poetry (101). In this way, she “participated in the rupture through which the new art of dance dismisses the representative art of ballet” (104).

Rancière’s account of dance history and of ballet especially would surely look different were it to account for elements of the non-narrative in the Ballets Russes (or, for that matter, in the French and English court ballets of the seventeenth century). Rancière is not trying to write dance history here, and yet his project has obvious historical investments in the attempt to accord new importance to figures such as Noverre and Fuller. To the extent that this is his project, it is reasonable for dance scholars to fault him for his scant use of other research on these figures. In his chapter on Fuller, he cites only two dance scholars: Giovanni Lista’s (1994) biography of Fuller and Nancy Ruyter’s (1999) account of Delsarte. His account of Fuller’s endeavor to copyright her *Serpentine Dance*, for example—which he takes as an attempt to enshrine effect and gesture alongside idea and drama—might take this legal move as both more and less radical were his theorizations informed by scholars who have devoted nuanced attention to this incident. As Anthea Kraut (2011) has suggested, in filing lawsuits, Fuller may have been perfectly willing to treat her dance as a form of storytelling when it proved exigent. Rancière’s assessment of how Fuller’s dance relates to new ways of seeing (including those of Mallarmé) might likewise gain nuance by considering recent attention to the role of race and sexuality in Fuller’s aesthetics.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps this is all merely to say ungenerously that he ought to do more history and less theory, and yet for many dance scholars, these are increasingly not exclusive intellectual pursuits. For many dance scholars, dance has always borne a vexed relationship to narrative. For many, it has also shared a nearly transhistorical affinity with contestatory politics, a mode that is central to Rancière’s conception of the aesthetic regime.

For Rancière, the aesthetic regime is political because it refuses self-evident relationships between what is seen and what that seeing means, indeed because it alters what is seeable in the first place. For him, the “great innovation” of Fuller’s dancing body is its self-sufficient ability to “produce its own space of apparition” (98), in which the body is “miming the act of appearing instead of miming the appearance of characters to whom something happens” (99). Many critics collected in *Dance [and] Theory* ground their understanding of dance as a medium in a similarly self-reflexive model. For many contributors to this volume, dance is not a figure for figuration, but an *act* of theorization, and one of dance’s distinguishing features is its self-theorizing capacity. Is such a view borne out by their findings, or is it merely a nice theory?

*Dance [and] Theory* benefits from an experimental approach to the relationship between dance and theory, and querying that relationship from multiple angles and through multiple understandings of both terms. A further virtue is that since the volume grew out of a 2011 conference in Berlin, it offers the Anglophone world exposure to a largely German set of approaches to its topic. And yet the volume’s reception will likely depend entirely on its readers’ existing disposition toward theory: it will win few new converts and will frustrate those who fault writing of a highly theoretical bent for its supposed imprecision. This factor is heightened at points by translations of questionable idiomaticity—since theory often voices its critique through subtle wordplay, solecisms can have a muzzling effect. Meanwhile, the volume will rightly gladden those who see theory and dance as nearly inseparable discourses, and who crave a multifaceted inquiry into their overlap. As may be expected of an anthology with thirty-seven contributors, the quality of work varies considerably.

What were once three keynote speeches now anchor the volume as longer essays, one by each of the volume’s editors and one by Susan Leigh Foster. Foster’s lucid contribution proves indispensable for its etymological and disciplinary account of what theory has meant and entailed from Plato to the present; she pays particular attention to when and how theory has involved embodied components. Her essay brings clarity to the concept of theory by tracing its *movement* over time, exemplifying the benefits of a historically attuned engagement with theory.

Klein suggests that “dance theory formulates itself in and through” dance practice, and that this practice is often inherently critical in that it tests “new forms of community, friendship, and complicity” and will often “experiment with new forms of production” (138–9). She is thus interested in a “praxeological critical theory of dance” (138). Wary of what she sees as a post-Fordist moment in which neoliberal politics too often fabricate “conceptual consensus” (146), she sees dance inside institutions—for example the dance B.A. and M.A. programs proliferating in the German academy—as a potential force for sustaining theory’s mission of critique (147). Brandstetter takes the question of theory and practice in a different direction, noting what she terms a “dis/balance” between those theories used to produce choreography and those theories used to analyze it (198). She suggests that balance might be achieved by seeing critical observation as an *active* form of spectatorship (and hence a praxis), and by noting the ways in which performance is a reflective process (and so inflected by theory). She shows that any seeming “balance” between theory and practice in dance is always precarious, as in her reading of Kleist’s treatise on the dance of marionettes, where puppet dance bears a pleasant resemblance to Rancière’s discussion of Fuller. Kleist marks a “crisis in the discourse on grace” by questioning where bodily grace resides: in the knowledge of the operator or in the mechanical perfection of the marionette? The question is irresolvable precisely because this form of grace is “prosthetic” (206).

The sections of *Dance [and] Theory* replicate the conference’s panel topics: Artistic Research, Aesthetics, Politics, Archives, and the Next Generation. Essays from prominent scholars introduce each section, and each section closes with a thoughtful response from an additional scholar. The intervening essays bear the marks of considerable interchange leading up to the conference and in its aftermath. Indeed, just when one might want to put some pressure on the thought of one contribution, another contribution frequently does just that. For example, André Lepecki (in an

indispensable essay) shows that Hannah Arendt's conception of politics—that it is specifically dancelike in its ephemerality—makes dance a crucial site of inquiry for exploring Rancière's view of politics as dissensual, since they are dissensual in part on account of their precarity (153–4). Lepecki revisits the work of a range of major scholars over the last couple of decades who have shown that “dance theorizes its social context as it practices itself, which constitutes perhaps its most significant political trait and force” (154). And yet, just as Lepecki closes his exploration by entering trickier territory—wondering how theories and practices of dance can lead directly to new political theorizations and actions—the essay that directly follows confronts such suggestions more skeptically. Franco Barrionuevo Anzaldi questions whether overemphasizing the dissensual “overestimates the genuine possibility of dance to act politically” (159).

Almost all of the contributors to the Politics section take Rancière's thought as a starting point, the utility of which Gunter Gebauer questions, since he sees Rancière as rarely accounting for the “significance of the body” (187). This is of course precisely what Rancière has begun to do in *Aisthesis*. As noted above, one place where Rancière connects the aesthetic to the political is in his discussion of a general strike, a corporate bodily gesture that makes “strategic action and radical inaction” equivalent (xvi); this is one example he uses to explain how “emancipated movement” does not open a breach between aesthetics and “real action” (xv). Perhaps his most explicit bridging of the political and the aesthetic comes when he suggests that Fuller's art, because it instrumentalizes the body only in order to disappear the body, is above all concerned with the “bodily potential to create a sensible milieu” that undoes “conventional meanings” (106–8). As a result, Fuller's dance is “far more than a rendezvous for aesthetes,” and is instead a bodily act that articulates a vision of pure social potential, one in which “the sensible milieu of existence and the form of community obey one and the same principle” (109). Rancière does not so much suggest a causal relationship between aesthetic upheavals and social formations as he does a complementary and coextensive one.

Such a view is often echoed in the Aesthetics section of *Dance [and] Theory*, where Gerald Siegmund notes that the resurgence of aesthetics as a topic in dance studies has involved a focus on “aesthetic experience” (81). In negotiating the pitfalls between an overly autonomous conception of art and one that situates aesthetic experience wholly in the material situation of a given performance, Siegmund notes that for many of the volume's contributors, what makes dance distinctive is its status as “a dynamic performance practice that generates its own rules while at the same time being able to absorb contexts” (87). Other contributors point toward ways in which dance aesthetics contains distinctive political potential, noting the aporias that occur as a result of kinesthetic empathy (Sabine Huschka), audience participation (Julian Rebentisch), and dance's collaborative process of production (Victoria Pérez Royo and Krassimira Kruschkova). Katherine Mezur makes a welcome intervention by reminding us that aesthetic theory itself must avoid universalism, since dance aesthetics are always local and too easily naturalized (120–5).

In a telling anecdote, Kruschkova discusses a performance where the audience was brought to see the dancers not as a group with a telos—a shared aesthetic mission—but as a group more literally brought together by different modes of public transportation. Kruschkova calls this a “paratactical togetherness instead of a taxonomical one” (98). The interpretive estrangement on offer in this anecdote almost epitomizes what the volume's contributors see as inherent to the relationship of theory and dance: both are congenitally oriented toward unsettling expected relationships, and both do this to each other. It is no wonder that Rancière mobilizes dance in an exciting furtherance of his aesthetic theory, and no wonder that a collection of dance scholars is able to do this with far greater nuance.

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## Note

1. Among many others, Ann Cooper Albright (2007), Rhonda Garelick (2007), and Anthea Kraut (2011).

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